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Masters of War: History's Greatest Strategic Thinkers

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Transcript Book

Mao Tse-tung in Theory and Practice

Lecture 19

Mao Tse-tung is unique among our masters for the scale of his own political and military achievements. In the course of the Chinese Civil War, Mao led the Chinese Communists back from abject defeat in the mid-1930s to the military conquest of most of China in 1949. His success is largely explained by his theory of insurgent war and his ability to put it into practice. In this lecture, we'll examine that theory and see it in action in the Chinese Civil War. We'll also discuss why Mao's theories are still viewed as relevant by insurgents and counterinsurgents alike.

Background on Mao

- Mao was born into a modestly prosperous peasant family in 1893 and first exposed to Marxist-Leninist thought at Peking University. In 1921, Mao attended the founding meeting of the Chinese Communist Party and later joined the Kuomintang, or Chinese Nationalist Party, as part of the First United Front.

- In 1927, the United Front collapsed, and Chiang Kai-shek ordered a purge of Communists from within his Nationalist Party. Mao was ordered by the central Communist Party to lead an uprising against the Nationalists in Hunan, but it failed, and Mao was forced to seek refuge in the countryside. Mao and a few remnants of the shattered Chinese Communist Party ultimately established a base area in the mountains of Jiangxi Province.

- The Communists were eventually forced out of Jiangxi and onto the Long March, which brought them to the even more remote and barren environs of Yenan. There, Mao began to write at length about strategies in China's revolutionary war.
    - He embraced the Marxist idea that all socioeconomic systems throughout history contained within themselves the seeds of their own destruction.

- At the same time, he was profoundly Leninist in his emphasis on the need for a disciplined and ideologically pure party to lead the revolution and to prevent the movement from losing focus.

- At the beginning of Mao's career, China was still semi-feudal. By Marxist orthodoxy, it was not yet ready for socialism or communism. But Mao argued that the contradictions in the Chinese socioeconomic system were sufficiently explosive that a Communist-led revolution would speed China through Marx's phases of history.

"On Protracted War"

- Mao's essay "On Protracted War" lays out a three-phase formula for revolutionary warfare: (1) strategic defense, (2) strategic stalemate, and (3) strategic counteroffensive. As a good Marxist and a good student of Clausewitzian interaction, Mao emphasizes the dialectics of each phase, in other words, the balance and interaction between the two belligerents.

- In the first phase, strategic defense, the invader or the counterrevolutionary is on the offensive and the insurgent is on the defensive.
  - But Mao's first phase is not just an operational defensive. It is designed to lure the enemy past its culminating point of attack, at which point, small insurgent bands can overwhelm overextended and isolated enemy units.

  - These small offensives within the larger strategic defense are an important source of arms and ammunition. They are also designed to push the population toward more active support of the revolutionary movement.

- In the second phase, strategic stalemate, the enemy has essentially ceded large swaths of territory, and the insurgency moves from relying on the generosity of the population to building a government to lead the population. At the same time, the army is gaining in competence and continuing to capture supplies and weapons.

- Ideally, the third phase, strategic counteroffensive, is the shortest phase of a protracted war. The rebels have the manpower, materiel, and training necessary to meet the enemy in a conventional campaign. Ultimately, the conventional defeat of the counterrevolutionary army in the field compounds the internal weaknesses of the now-hollow regime and convinces its allies to abandon it.

- Note that "On Protracted War" actually relates to two distinct struggles: the war of national liberation against the Japanese and the revolutionary war against Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Party. This is particularly relevant to phase III, because the scale of the final counteroffensive will vary depending on whether the rebels are dealing with a foreign occupier or an indigenous government.
    - The value of the object, that is, maintaining power over occupied territory, will likely be lower for a foreign invader. An indigenous government will probably value its hold of national territory much more highly and will be much more strategically focused on suppressing the revolution within.

    - A single offensive victory might be sufficient to convince a foreign power that the costs of the war have exceeded the value of the object. But when it comes to overthrowing the national government, a series of offensive campaigns will be needed.

- Phase III is certainly appealing in theory, but it is a challenge to implement in practice. A premature leap into a strategic counteroffensive may actually play to the strengths of the incumbent regime. Mao was aware of this problem, and his answer was for the rebels to fall back on a robust phase II or even phase I.

Mao on Civil-Military Relations

- On the subject of civil-military relations, Mao takes Clausewitz's subordination of the military to the political to an extreme. In a revolutionary war, everything the military does has political ramifications; thus, political oversight must be highly invasive.

- Ultimately, maintaining absolute subordination of the military is essential to winning the war against what Mao calls the "enemies with guns," as well as consolidating the revolution against the "enemies without guns" (the secret counterrevolutionaries).

Mao in Practice

- The Chinese Civil War breaks down into three fairly clear phases, but Mao's elegant script is much more messy and contingent in practice than in theory.

- Phase I corresponds to the period from 1927–1937, with Chiang Kai-shek on the offensive and the Chinese Communists on the defense. Following the demolition of the urban base of the Communist Party in 1927, the remnants fell back to isolated base areas in the hinterland, the largest and best organized of which was in Jiangxi Province.
    - Over the next six years, the Communists in Jiangxi gradually expanded that base and were able to occupy towns and some small cities. At the same time, they experimented with different approaches to land and social reform, and Mao cobbled together a modest military force that he called the Red Army.

    - In 1933–1934, Chiang Kai-shek encircled and strangled the Communists' base in Jiangxi, forcing them to break out and undertake the Long March. Chiang tried to repeat the encirclement strategy at the Communists' new refuge in northwest China, but most of his accomplishments were undone by the Japanese invasion in 1937.

- The outset of phase II is marked by the Japanese invasion, which provided some relief for the Communists, allowing them to build more base areas and sell themselves as fighting a foreign invader. In reality, after 1941, neither the Japanese nor Chiang Kai-shek could muster enough energy to oust the Communists from their bases.

- When Japan surrendered in 1945, the Communists were far stronger than they had been in the 1930s and had a higher domestic and international profile.

- They were, however, still at a significant disadvantage relative to the Nationalists. The territory they controlled was desolate and remote, and they faced desperate shortages of weapons, tanks, and trucks.

- By 1947, the Communists, now armed with captured Japanese and American weapons and supplied by the Soviet Union, transitioned to phase III. By late 1948, 600,000 Red Army troops fought an equal number of Nationalist troops for a critical railway junction in Anhui Province.
  - In a battle that lasted more than two months, the Communists achieved victory through mechanized maneuver warfare and their new mastery of artillery. By the end of January 1949, Chiang Kai-shek had lost all of North China to the Communists.

  - On October 1, 1949, Mao proclaimed the founding of the People's Republic of China.

The Three Phases in Manchuria

- In 1945, both Chiang and Mao took a huge gamble and committed significant forces to Manchuria. In the short term, the gamble didn't pay off for Mao.

- Essentially, the Communists rushed into a premature phase II in Manchuria, trying to seize and govern three provinces. Chiang Kai-shek capitalized on their overextension and drove them back into a combination of phase I in southern Manchuria and phase II in some parts of the north.

- In the process, however, Chiang became overextended. By early 1947, the Nationalists were past their culminating point of attack, but Chiang could not accept the political risks of ceding territory.

The Communists were able to gradually wear down isolated garrisons and seize their weapons and vehicles.

- This sounds like a classic transition from phase I to phase II, but the Communists didn't have time to win the loyalty of the population. Instead, they conducted a systematic campaign of mass murder to terrorize the people into support.

- Backed up by the ruthless exploitation of the people and enabled by unprecedented levels of manpower and materiel, Mao's Red Army leapt into phase III.

- In 1948, the Communists completed the conquest of Manchuria and threw their full strength into the conquest of those areas south of the Great Wall. At this point, they could claim the political legitimacy they had lacked as rural guerillas.

- Mao's three phases worked in Manchuria, but the conditions there may well have been too ideal to repeat. Manchuria thus represents a problematic proof of Mao's theory.

Mao's Legacy

- In his youth, Mao had envisioned the Communist Party's role as harnessing a whirlwind of popular dissatisfaction. By 1948–1949, after 20 years of brutal struggle, the only way Mao could defeat the Nationalists was by shifting to a systematic campaign to exploit the peasant masses.

- This is Clausewitz's trinity in the making. Mao saw that the use of violence by the party could mobilize the passions of the people. Popular passion and support would strengthen the party but also give it the military means to contend with the Nationalists in the realm of chance and probability. By dominating that realm militarily, Mao defeated his enemies and achieved his ultimate political purpose.

- Mao's stunning victory in China made him something of an icon among communists in the developing world. By the 1950s, insurgent leaders were hungrily devouring Mao's writings, and China was sending aid and advisors to movements around the globe.

- But Mao's legacy goes far beyond the Cold War. From the Shining Path in Peru in the 1980s and 1990s to the communist movement that took power in Nepal in 2008, Mao's prescriptions for revolution have maintained their appeal and their apparent effectiveness.

Suggested Reading

Beckett, "Mao Tse-tung and Revolutionary Warfare."

Mao Tse-tung, "On Protracted War."

Marks, ed., *Maoist Insurgency since Vietnam*.

Questions to Consider

1. What are Mao's three phases? What is the critical vulnerability of each phase?

2. Is Mao more of a Sunzian or a Clausewitzian?